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# Finding the Words…
# With Augmented Communication
(Part 1)

The mother of a three-year-old on the spectrum called me not long ago. "Max doesn't talk," she began, "and I don't think he ever will. So, what would you recommend instead? PECS?" Most of us in the autism community know something about the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and often find it useful in jump-starting reciprocal communication in our youngsters. But I realized this mom was considering using PECS to do more than 'augment' Max's oral communication, or provide a temporarily 'alternative'. She thought she had to make an either/or choice about Max's communicative future. Would it be oral language *or* visual symbols?

How many other parents hold this perception, I wondered? At that moment I knew the time had come to address AAC in this column, and look more deeply at where *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* fits for our kids: at age 3, and as they grow up. AAC has certainly come of age in the autism community, and it's time we do too, about AAC. So, with this hope, our new series begins, this time exploring the natural dimensions of *augmented communication*.

At its simplest level, *augmented communication* means that while you are encouraging your child's oral language development, you are also including some 'augmentative' input to him (pictures, perhaps) and output from him (pictures, perhaps). On the 'inputting side,' it is to a young child's advantage to 'augment' your oral language to him with sign language, or with materials such as drawings, photographs, and other visual supports. If a picture is worth a thousand words, we shouldn't underestimate their value to our visual kids! On the 'outputting' side, it may also be to a child's advantage to provide him the opportunity to 'augment' his own oral language as well (pointing to pictures, for example).

'Augmenting' oral language is something parents and teachers do naturally, and we can readily think of at least a dozen modalities we use all the time in our daily communiqués with children: body language, facial expression, picture books, concrete choices, notes on the fridge. Sometimes we're talking at the same time and these modalities 'augment' our speech. Other times we are silent, and they are 'alternatives' to speech. AAC, thought of in this way, begins to have a ring of real naturalness to it!

AAC sometimes seems synonymous with 'high tech' equipment in our modern world; a little historical context puts this in perspective. In the mid-60's, before the term AAC was coined, the concept of *total communication* was first embraced by teachers of the hearing impaired as a departure from the notion that deaf children should be taught with *either* oral language or sign language. It implied that children could be taught with both modalities simultaneously, and this would enhance learning. In the next decades, *total communication* was broadened to include others who might benefit from sign language and other forms of communication augmentation. At a time when only 'low tech' options existed, *total communication* meant supporting a child's receptive and expressive language through multiple modalities including speech, gesture, body proximity, eye gaze, sign language, pictures, spelling with alphabet boards, drawing, writing, and typing.

Today, *total communication* concepts are embraced within the field of *augmented communication*, which supports the availability of all communicative modalities to enhance language comprehension and expression. A child might use one or more of them in one exchange, and something completely different the next. Because contexts, supports, and social dynamics are constantly changing, any of us might nod during one conversational turn, shrug the next, and wax eloquent the next. It all depends… And as Thomas' story

> We have to **be open** to whatever mode of communication our kids have available… **now!**

## Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

in our last column illustrated, wordless communication is often the most effective!

One of the tenants of *augmented communication* is to avoid taking away communication that an individual already has in one modality, in an attempt to teach another modality. This tenant certainly doesn't preclude developmentally-appropriate communication skills gradually replacing immature skills. As our kids learn and progress, we will always be supporting their emerging skills. But what this AAC tenant means is that at any particular moment, it is ok for your child to use a picture card when he asks for juice, use a word approximation the next time, and lead you to the refrigerator the next. ASD kids seem to come into each moment with a different set of supports and challenges from the last. So, we have to be open to whatever mode of communication our kids have available…*now!* To stay with the juice example, we would be wise to keep in mind that a child is most likely to come out with a new word when he is motivated, but not in dire need of it. When he is really hungry, and needs the word "juice" the most, he is likely to scream or cry or fall asleep, but not retrieve, or 'find' the word. As we continue with Thomas' story in the next columns, you will see how, over the years, he has self-selected his own modalities for the varying conditions of his life!

Let's pause here for a little background information, and a few definitions. If you have been reading this column regularly, you know that our kids' communication takes place in several contexts at the same time. You may want to review some of our earlier topics:  how language develops for our kids, how language retrieval compares with language development, how dyspraxic speech on the spectrum can be supported, how intentionality can be recognized in our kids' communication, and how you can help make your child's communicative attempts successful.

We have many communication goals for our kids. We want them to communicate effectively with others. We want them to comprehend and use language. And we want to give them the opportunity to become effective speakers. But communication does not equal language, and language does not equal speech.  Each is a process of its own. Most communication doesn't even involve language; it's more about the nonverbals, and the vocal tone. And language doesn't have to involve speech. As long as it's about words, it's language, whether it's written, typed, or finger spelled. Even though words are combinations of arbitrary phonetic symbols that can be spoken with sound, they can be just as successfully written as sequences of corresponding letters.

How does all this matter in augmented communication? Well, sometimes we care, and other times we don't care, if our augmentation is language or not. When children are young, we routinely augment language comprehension with non-language elements, like real objects and pictures. But even the picture that's worth a thousand words is not a 'word' because it does not contain phonetic structure. In it's purely illustrative state, it can't promote phonetic understanding. The same limitation is true of most signs. They may mimic the item they represent, be conceptually symbolic, or sometimes include a critical sound in the word. But, finger-spelling aside, signs are generally not phonetic language.

Eventually we need to bridge back to words if we are to promote language development. Pictures and signs worked as a conceptual bridge in the first place, but as children grow, we need to add written words and phonetic structure to our augmentative signs and symbols by turning our visuals back into the words they illustrate and represent.

But that's a story for next time… Until then, you have lots of food for thought, and a few 'words' to live by. One of them is 'augment', itself, which means 'to make greater'. As you realize the 'augmentations' you naturally use with your child already, please know you are making your impact greater in the process, and helping your child's development become 'greater' as well! ▪▶

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# Finding the Words...
# With Augmented Communication

(Part 2)

Hello, dear readers, and welcome to our second column on 'finding the words' with AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication). If you have not read Part 1 of this series, I would strongly suggest you do so, as Part 2 will then make much more sense!

In Part 1, we looked at the theory of AAC, from a practical and a historical perspective, and saw that 'augmenting' our speech *input* to our kids (with books, songs, our facial expression, etc.) just makes good sense, and is something we do naturally. We also saw that recognizing how our kids 'augment' their speech *output* is natural, too. We watch our kids' eyes to discover what interests them; we watch their smiles and their jumps of glee; we offer them objects to see which one they reach for at a particular moment; and we listen carefully to their voices, to hear sound patterns that indicate their feelings. Because 'augmented communication' is what we do anyway, it is familiar, taken in this context. And because it is so important, it's potential is something we want to further explore.

But, unfortunately, all we often hear about AAC are the 'brand names'. "Are you doing PECS?" "Do you have Board-Maker?" "Jack just got a Dynavox." So, our first task in Part 2 of this series is to demystify some of the aura that surrounds AAC systems and devices, and remind ourselves that while each comes with a set of goals and training instructions, none come with a translation manual for your child. You are the only one who can write that book, because you and your child are the only ones who really know your child's story. All communication, including your child's, emanates from personal intentions: the loves, desires, dislikes, and fears you watch for in your child's eyes, his reach, his tantrums. So, when you pick up a new AAC

**Your child's own story will always be your best guide.**

training manual, read it with your child in mind, and then move it to your book case…on the shelf just below the one that holds the story of your child. It *never* belongs on a higher shelf, and our teenaged teacher, Thomas, is here again to remind us why.

Featured in our last two columns, Thomas is now 15 years old, and he has lived through several instruction manuals. All that time, Thomas has mainly aspired to be a 'real boy'. Dealing with dyspraxia, a significant auditory challenge, and a language delay, Thomas would want us to know that being limited to one system or protocol, be it low tech or high tech, can be demeaning and unsupportive. It is hardly what real boys with real communicative intentions want and need. So he rebelled against the drill-style picture choices, instead reaching into the bag of un-drilled pictures, to find the one he wanted! "It never worked," recalls his mother. Instead, Thomas opted out, and waited until people really 'listened' to him, and understood that *his 'totality' of communication* was much more!

Thomas' family long advocated for a voice output device that Thomas could program himself and use to help refine his speech. "He always talked," adds his mother. "But he needed to hear the words before he could say them." Thomas now has such a device, and, this time, he 'owns' it, and only uses it with a select few, who won't take it away and reprogram it with things he doesn't want.

In the meantime, Thomas has invented his own set of AAC 'outputs', laughter being one of his favorites. He is the poster teen for 'total communication,' too, as he moves rapidly from one modality to another…just like most of us do in our daily communiqués. To Thomas' way of thinking, being a real boy
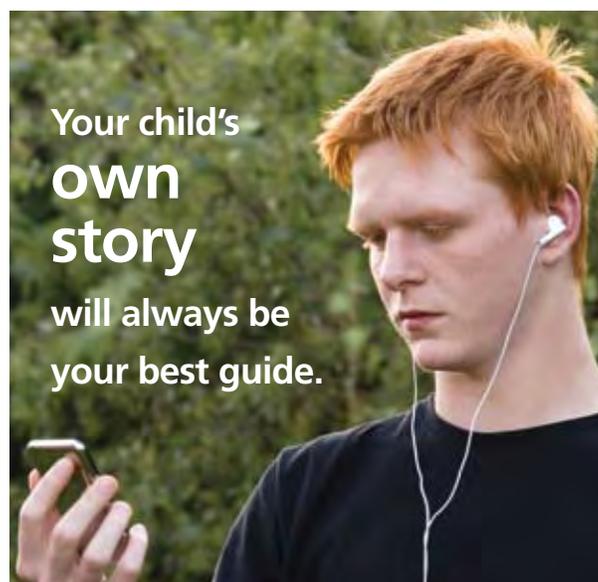
means communicating all kinds of things that other real boys do, in all sorts of ways. Being serious one moment, playful the next – letting his own real personality shine through his 'words.' Being 'cheeky' like his tank engine moniker suggests, Thomas will joke around using his Dynavox MT4, saying, "Let's go to Woodman's" about forty times, laughing all the while at the power of the voice output! To Thomas, total communication means getting his mother to drive the car, and pointing at each intersection until the car arrives at Wal-Mart. It means wanting the battery for his device to hold a charge so he can order at Burger King whenever he wants, and have a friend record a joke on it. It means making judicious eye contact with a true friend who gets the deeper meaning of particular communiqués. And, perhaps most importantly, it means using his voice whenever and however it is available, perhaps asking over and over, with a smile on his face, "Have bubbles?", until everyone scrounges the toy room so he will stop! That's Thomas!

Of course, we parents and professionals don't want our children limited to 'one size fits all' programs, and yet we often overlook other modes of expression that allow our children to demonstrate who they really are. We need to remember that one of the important tenants of augmented communication is to not take away communication that an individual has in one modality, in an attempt to teach another.

In his early years, Thomas rebelled against training protocols that limited his communication. Thomas "did the mechanical part" of various programs, his mother recalls, and would just "fill in the blank" whenever he was supposed to make a choice. He started not caring, and just "tuned out." Picture choices were somebody else's agenda, and they never became his own. Thomas wanted to talk…period! He honored the human voice so much that when he'd hear a girl he knew, much more vocally-challenged than himself, make an undifferentiated sound, he would go over to her and switch the screen on her AAC display. He could 'hear' the communicative intent, and responded! Thomas has always known the value of total communication, and has acknowledged it in others!

And, that's the way it is with total communication. Access to speech may come in fits and starts, but when that channel is open, AAC isn't needed. A minute or an hour later, AAC may be essential. Thomas has taught us this: if a child says it, that's good enough; if a child uses AAC, that's good enough, too. If a child 'owns' his own voice and his own AAC, he is free to combine them, or let one trigger the other. And that is what we want: for AAC to be part of the communicative voice a child has…part of his *total communication* package!

This is also how Thomas has been teaching himself to speak better, by the way, and is also the way we can help our kids bridge from picture forms of AAC back to language. One can facilitate the other, if we provide the language bridge. Thomas did exactly that with his 15-Talker, a small AAC device he used before getting his MT4. Thomas would record music and his own voice, play it back, and practice. Thomas loved to rehearse songs this way, thus addressing auditory processing, expressive language, and his phonetic speech production, all at the same time.

Now that Thomas has recently added high-tech AAC to his repertoire, he and his SLP, Megan, are committed to keeping this device his own. Thomas' school-based SLP is committed to that too, so Thomas now has a fighting chance to show himself to be the real boy he knows he is!

Until next time then, dear reader, please remember that Thomas' story is important not because he's 'typical'; it's because he's unique. And so is your child! So, revisit that book on your shelf at home that describes your child, especially your child's communicative intentions. Mark your place in that book well, and remember to refer to it before you pick up any of the plethora of 'how to' manuals out there. Your child's own story will always be your best guide. Remember that Thomas, the 'cheeky' real teenager, has told you so! ▰

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# Finding the Words...
# With Augmented Communication
(Part 3)

Hello, dear readers and welcome to our third column on 'finding the words' with augmented communication! Let's begin by reviewing where we've been so far. In our first column, we described augmented communication as a natural process, one that parents and teachers use every day with their language-developing children. We provide pictures, for instance, to make our language easier to understand, and to help our kids express themselves more successfully.

In our second column, we featured a teenager named Thomas, who has explored many types of AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) over his 15 years, rejecting some modalities, while embracing and self-styling others. We recommended that you begin the story of your own child's communication, and use it as the jumping off point for AAC decision-making.

Now, in this third column, we will help you get started, by first asking you to describe what your child loves. What are the things that make him happiest? Next, you will describe how your child communicates those loves. Before long, you will have begun a process of decision-making: how to support your child's communication, how to individualize supports, and how to help your child continue to develop speech and language along the way!

It all begins wherever your child is now. Let's start with what you know.

### Chapter 1 – What my child loves

What delights your child? What makes him laugh? Or jump up and down with delight? Let Thomas, our teenaged mentor, reassure you that one's loves simply *are*! They are a treasured part of what makes each of us unique. For Thomas, you might recall, they include laughing, bugging his friends, making a mess with bubble juice, going to the grocery store, leading his mom on a drive to a destination known only to him. That's Thomas!

> **The best AAC builds on modalities** a child prefers and finds most salient.

I'll give you one more example. Three-year-old Russel, whom we featured in an earlier column series on visual thinking, used some echolalic language, and was formulating only a few phrases on his own. His loves were pretty clear, however. He loved automatic doors, watching cars go down the street, boxes with well-fitting lids, sticky-sweet desserts, his dad's whiskers, 'Exit' signs, and a complete alphabet puzzle, for starters.

Now that you have some examples, please stop and write Chapter 1 for your child. Jot down 5 or more things that delight him. Don't worry about 'how' you know what you know; just make a list. Don't judge yourself or your child… Don't discount something because you think it's 'a stim'. Just keep writing.

### Chapter 2 – How I know what my child loves

How did you learn your child's loves? What were the clues? Does he carry around the letter 'B' all day? Does he cry until you rewind his favorite scene in a movie? Does he fuss unless you dress him in one of his gold shirts, every day?

Let's take Russel as an example. I knew what this 3-year-old loved when he:

1. looked, smiled, and laughed each time an automatic door opened or closed
2. stood by a window to watch for cars going down the street, laughing whenever one went by, and occasionally sharing eye contact with an adult who was watching too
3. went to every 'Exit' sign in a building; if carried, leaned towards them
4. assembled alphabets from sets of letters, and cried if a letter was missing

Now, please think about the items on your own child's list, and how he demonstrated enjoyment of each. How did you know he loves Barney, or sand, or whatever it is… Please take your time!

Done? Great! You have just proven that you are your child's best communication partner! In the process, you have described your child's communication, and taken the first steps of an AAC assessment!

### Chapter 3 – My child's communication modalities

Now let's look more closely at the modes of communication your child uses. To get you ready, consider the modalities Russel used in indicating his loves. They included eye gaze, facial expression, body orientation, manual manipulation and vocalizing.

Now, consider how each modality fit into Russel's life:
*   *Eye gaze* – As a visual youngster, Russel always looked at the objects of his desires, thus pointing out with his eyes what interested him. Although Russel never pointed with his whole hand or finger, he always 'pointed' with eye gaze. Eye contact is a special kind of visual referencing Russel has always reserved for moments when he and someone else share something special.
*   *Facial expression* – Russel never used manual gestures, but his facial expressions were always indicators of his loves, dislikes, and questions.
*   *Body orientation* – Low-tone as a toddler, Russel was still able to lean in the direction he wanted to go! As he was being held, his body 'reached' in a way his arms were not ready to. Once he could walk, Russel's body orientation included moving himself to the object of his affection!
*   *Manual manipulation* – Russel's eyes always seemed to 'control' his hands. Even before he could coordinate his hands with his arms, he could control his hands if they were close to his face. Russel made choices, moved things, handed things to others, and spelled with plastic letters.
*   *Vocalizing* – Russel has always been vocal. While his language has taken years to develop (at age 11, he is still working on it), his voice has always been available to him. He could not always find the words he wanted, but he could always scream or cry, and almost always laugh or cheer with delight.

Yes, it takes some thought to come up with the 'modalities' your child uses, and, we will tackle this together in the next column. In the meantime, we wanted to give you a sneak preview into what you will discover once you do.

For Russel, eye gaze told volumes at an early age. As a language augmentation, it was flawless. His parents could just look at his eyes and know where his brain was going! Eye contact was rare, but highly meaningful. Since it was always spontaneous, it told great stories, and could be considered AAC at its best. Russel's eye gaze, facial expression, and eye contact needed free reign to be meaningful, however. We could not, and did not, target them to work on.

But Russel's other augmentative modalities were ones he could work on, and he enjoyed it! Russel loved 'manual manipulation', and, as he got stronger, his hands became coordinated with the 'body orientation' of whole body activities. Russel didn't focus on pictures, but he loved the alphabet, so spelling, reading, and writing became natural augmentative modalities. Over time, in fact, Russel's beautiful handwriting became a much more reliable communication mode than his hard-to-retrieve oral language.

But Russel's story is his own, not your child's…and not the same as any other child's. Next time, we'll continue to help you look at your child by presenting a completely different scenario: a child with less manual dexterity, but with more interest in pictures. Again we'll look at how the best AAC builds on modalities a child prefers and finds most salient.

In the meantime, we know your child will enjoy your focused attention on his communication, and we know, too, that his augmented communication will benefit from it! ▐▸

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# Finding the Words…
# With Augmented Communication

(Part 4)

Hello again, dear reader. I've thought about you many times this fall, and hoped that you and your child have had some fun, and some success, with the augmentative communication you have used together! I hope you've identified ways your child lets you know what he loves: earmarked the page of a favorite book that marks nighttime, or recorded a smile that means "I love you" in your child's book of communication!

When I left you last time, you had written several chapters about your child, starting with his favorite things in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2 you noted how your child indicates his desires, and you learned that these actions are his "modalities" of communication!

You were beginning the third chapter of your child's book when we left off. We had just described some of the important modalities used by one little boy: eye gaze, facial expression, body orientation, manual manipulation, and vocalizing. With these five modalities, our young Russel could communicate that he loved automatic doors, and tight-fitting lids, that he could put together the alphabet, that he intensely disliked any letters being missing…and much more. Russel was on his way to using spelling, writing and typing as speech augmentations, and his language flourished once he could assemble letter combinations that created words!

Please pause for a moment and think of one of your own child's loves… How did you learn he loved it? How does your child show you? You are in the middle of an AAC assessment right now…and I want to help you keep it going!

So let's consider another child, and another set of modalities. As a toddler, Lee always carried around a book or a favorite picture. He was especially interested in colors, and



**3, 2, 1 … tickle!**

toted around newspaper ads if the color scheme was right. Carrying pictures from place to place, Lee would hand us one he especially liked. Developing a picture communication system for Lee seemed natural as the next step in augmenting his communication.

Lee was dyspraxic, so "motor planning" speech he'd never said before only happened when Lee was well supported (See *When Speech Gets Stuck*, *Autism Asperger's Digest*, Sept-Oct, and Nov-Dec, 2004). Of course, we supported Lee physically and emotionally, but pictures were Lee's best support for talking! When he was comfortably engaged with pictures, Lee could access messages that were difficult-to-impossible otherwise.

Lee could also use a whole hand point, which along with some nice manual gestures, gave us a good indication of what was on his mind. His strong eye contact was his failsafe, as he could hold a gaze until his intentions were understood and acknowledged! Over time, the use of pictures developed the most, and Lee learned to use pictures to trigger more precise communiqués. They remained his best modality for some time, while his reading developed, and his speech access continued to become easier.

We want to return to your child's Chapter 3, but first, we have one more illustrative story. Diego is a boy with severe vocal dyspraxia, and highly restricted voice access. He likes to sign a little, and has been taught a few signs that he uses periodically as part of his smorgasbord of communicative options. Diego also enjoys his voice-output device, where activities he likes are represented with line drawings. Diego also loves to reference other media, and will play movie clips he's found on the Internet to communicate his social interests and messages. Lately, Diego has also begun to draw, and this

# Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP
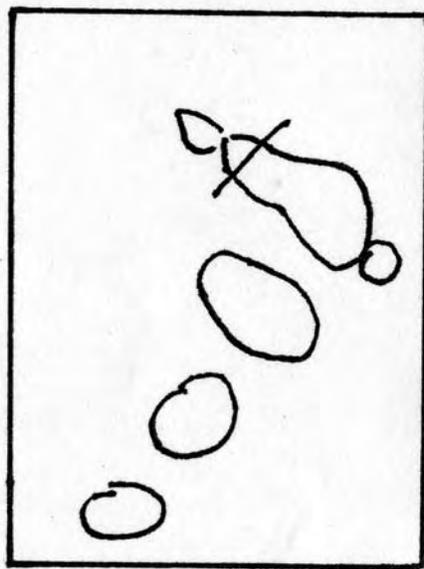
has become the flexible modality he prefers. Starting with the line drawings on his voice-output device, Diego began modifying them to better match his intentions. His favorite symbol, "tickle" (top symbol in drawing), now communicates what he prefers: "3, 2, 1 tickle"! Diego knows that more proprioception, more fun, and more alerting lead to easier speech access! Diego's AAC thus serves as "alternative communication" when he can't access speech, and "augmentative communication" (and a speech trigger) at others!

Now let's look at our list of modalities:
- eye gaze, facial expression, eye contact
- body orientation, manual manipulation, picture referencing
- pointing, manual gesture, signing, drawing
- spelling, writing, typing
- vocalizing (including crying, laughing, using intonation)
- referencing with other media

Yes, dear reader, you now have the tools to look at each of your child's communicative attempts and communicative successes, and figure out the "modality" of each! Your Chapter 3 can really take off, and you can note which modalities your child prefers, which he is best at, and which are used in a variety of situations. Please take some time now to jot down some thoughts, and then we will move on to Chapter 4.

Done? OK. Now let's consider Chapter 4 – Modalities my child might develop. In this chapter, you will select one or more of your child's modalities to further develop. Please know that Chapter 4 is an exploration, not a decision. You might consult your SLP, OT, or family friend to help you think it through. You are never locked into an idea if it doesn't work well. Remember to look back at your Chapter 3 often, and think about modalities your child already is using successfully! This will help you restart when you need to!

Here are some possible scenarios:
- You can try pictures if your child relates well to them. You might take photographs of some of your child's favorite things, and see if he can use them to make simple

selections. One caveat is to use these photographs in a true "augmentative" fashion, however. If favorite movies are routinely stored in a closet, for example, photographs of them might be taped on the closet door, for use in making a selection. Try not to "require" your child to select a picture of something that is within his easy reach or eye gaze. We don't *have* to use picture choices; rather, we *can*! Let the modality work for you and your child, not the other way around!
- You might try manual gestures, and talk to your OT about ways to increase reaching towards things, and pointing to things that are within easy reach. Sign language requires some dedicated attention to the use of the hands, and it will be helpful to you to have the partnership of your OT and SLP, should you decide to try this option,
- You might also try spelling with letters, if your child seems to have an early interest in how things are spelled. The advantage of the written word is that it represents speech, and is an automatic bridge to the spoken word…but that is a story for next time.

Suffice it to say that you have many options. Please remember that AAC is about communication, so it works only when it is the best way for communication to occur. If your child has already said it, or gotten it, for example, then it is communicatively pointless to select the option from an array of pictures! Please remain open to possibilities, and flexible enough to recognize communication whenever and however it happens.

All the best to you this fall, and we will look forward to continuing our series with concluding remarks next time! ▐►

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# Finding the Words...
# With Augmented Communication

(Part 5)

Welcome to our final column on augmented communication! As we conclude this series, let's first review some of the guiding principles we've established along the way:

- AAC is a natural phenomenon, and one we adults employ every day. It enhances children's understanding of the world, and helps the world understand our children's thoughts and developing speech. Picture books, letters on the fridge…we use them all naturally – and so do children.
- AAC isn't just high-tech computers and voice output devices. It's also the words a child points to in a book; it's "joint referencing" to the video case on the shelf a child "points" to with his eyes; it's the selection of breakfast cereal a child makes by grabbing it; it's also the pouty look that comes when a toy is missing from the array presented to a child.
- AAC adapts to change: change in the circumstances and change in our children. If it's right for your child, it enhances communication at the moment – and bridges to speech and language development in the future. If adults don't get "stuck" in one particular method or modality, we can make sure AAC remains all it can be as our children grow and mature.

In Parts 3 and 4 of this series, you were asked to think about your child's interests and learning style, and to write a book about your child to help in decision-making about AAC. Please review the exercises in these earlier columns, and, if you are new to this column, complete the exercises outlined there before continuing on. As you worked the exercises, you: identified what your child communicates spontaneously, and how he accomplishes this; identified your child's natural communication modalities; and selected certain modalities to develop as augmentations to your child's developing speech. Hopefully, during the last two months, you have tried out your child's personalized AAC, and now you are ready to evaluate your efforts.

In this final episode of our story, we want to help you think more about AAC as a bridge to your child's future communication. The more you are able to look ahead to where your child is going, the more you will be able to think of your child "on the road to the future". As you do this, you will select AAC that fits both the current situation - and helps point the way to the future. In this column, you will learn how to write the next chapter of your child's communication story: Chapter 5 – Planning for my child's future…AAC and beyond!

The first step is to write the *Introduction* to the chapter, by reframing your child's communication at the end of Chapter 4. Here are some helpful questions:

- Does your child continue to enjoy vocalizing? If you can say "yes," please reframe your answer to, "Yes, my child is learning to talk" or simply, "Yes, my child is a speaker." Please remember – speech is a motor skill, and your child will continue to develop it for years to come. He has his entire childhood to do it! If your child isn't vocalizing as much, however, it might be that the physical supports for speech need to be increased.
- Does your child spontaneously use the AAC you helped him learn? If you can say "yes," you might reframe your answer to, "Yes, my child's AAC is working." If he isn't using the modality you chose, it is time to look at introducing another to see if it is a better fit.

If you answered "yes" to both questions, and your child is both a speaker and an AAC user, you are ready to expand both modalities…and ready for the next part of Chapter 5: *Expansion*. Here are some questions to get you going in the right direction:

- Is your child talking more often, knowing his speech will be supported and honored? If not, he might be concentrating on using AAC, with limited energy to support speech. You might need to build in some "talking time" so your child knows how much you value his speech, and how you will continue to physically support and acknowledge it.

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- Is your child using more than one AAC option to communicate flexibly and independently? If not, your child might need another option or two to use in different situations, making sure that at least one of them matches his cognitive maturity. Picture options may be adequate for limited choice-making, but once a child has the understanding to be a reader, written words can be introduced as one AAC option.

If you answered "yes" to both questions, your child has a taste of both worlds: the viability of his developing speech, and the communicative usefulness of AAC. Your child can communicate some things with speech and some with AAC, and you are ready to begin bridging to his long-term future. AAC does not preclude speech development, but it takes focused effort to keep both moving forward simultaneously. Here are some questions for the third part of Chapter 5: *Planning*:

- Have you consulted an experienced Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) who can assess your child's speech development over time, and help you set up your child's environment to support the stages of speech development? (See the article, "When Speech Gets Stuck" on our website.)
- Have you consulted an experienced SLP who can assess your child's language development over time? (See "Finding the Words: To Tell the Whole Story")

AAC does not preclude language development any more than it precludes speech development, but language must be addressed directly when a child is young. English is a phonetic language, not a pictorial or iconic one, so when a child is ready, he needs developmentally-appropriate exposure to the spoken and printed word. An experienced SLP can help you know how much time and effort to devote to speech versus language versus communication, and where AAC fits in. With a profile of your child's development, you will know better how to use your limited time and resources, and those of your child.

The fourth part of this chapter, *Retrospective and Prospective*, will not be written for some time yet. The question is a broad one, and demands re-thinking again and again:

- Is your child's communicative repertoire keeping pace with his social and intellectual interests, and his physical development? You might need to make sure he is developing a full repertoire of speech, written language, quick pictorial choices, as well as gesture. Remember to consult with your SLP (and OT) for re-evals along the way.

As your child matures, the mixture of communication/language/speech/AAC will change. You will be wise to anticipate this, and remember what the children in this series have taught us. Thinking back to the lessons of Russel, Lee, Diego, and Thomas, we will close this series with a "retrospective" about Thomas. As you might recall, Thomas experienced precious moments of fluent speech access, separated by agonizingly-long periods of quiet. While his most memorable quotes have been highlighted in his own "book of communication," his more common communiqués came in the words of his favorite video rewinds. Still other moments of communication were punctuated by gales of laughter and jokes repeated on his voice output device. Mundane requests on this device sufficed for mundane situations, but, being a "real boy," as Thomas pointed out, meant having access to all these modalities at all times. For Thomas, "AAC and Beyond!" is a journey into the future, and it will be an exciting journey for your child too. We wish you all the best! 📽

**Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP** founded the Communication Development Center, in Madison, Wisconsin 10 years ago. Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses, the Center has successfully helped scores of children move through the stages of language acquisition. Visit www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com for info and articles, or email Marge at lyonblanc@aol.com.